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### 'Romantico' a heartfelt look at an immigrant's life

By Glenn Whipp, Film Critic

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In the opening minutes of Mark Becker's keenly observed documentary "Romantico," we meet Mexican musician Carmelo Muniz Sanchez as he wearily makes the rounds at taquerias and bars in San Francisco's Mission District. Sanchez and his musical partner Arturo Arias work as mariachis, serenading diners for tips that can amount to anywhere between \$15 and \$100 a night.



It's not much by American standards, but for the 57-year-old Sanchez, the money is a godsend, enough to lessen his anxieties about the future of his young daughters, who live with their mother in Salvatierra, a small Mexican city 1,000 miles south of the border.

"Romantico" turns out to be an immigrant's story in reverse. Sanchez spent three years in the States and then returned to Mexico to attend to his dying mother shortly after Becker began filming.

It wasn't an easy decision. At his age, Sanchez knows another illegal border crossing will probably be impossible — physically and financially. And what Sanchez can make in a good night in San Francisco will require two weeks' work in Mexico.

Becker's movie is subtle, unsentimental, but heart-rending all the same in its portrait of a kind man's single-minded focus on providing a better life for his


children. Sanchez's memories of his own childhood deprivation are clear, most vividly when he tells of giving free ice desserts to kids with tattered clothes. Now back in Mexico, Sanchez is selling the snow cones in an effort to approach a fraction of the money he made in the

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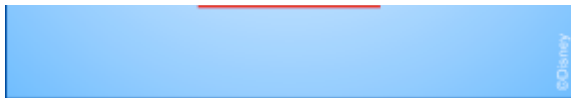
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States.

"Romantico" isn't a political treatise on immigration, but a reminder of how tough it is to

overcome poverty with limited means and education.

Sanchez pours his soul into his music, sad songs of loneliness, lost love and missed opportunities. It's clear he doesn't have to work hard to imagine any of the scenarios.

## ROMANTICO

**Our rating:** ★★★★★

(Not rated: thematic material)

**Director:** Mark Becker.

**Running time:** 1 hr. 20 min.

**Playing:** Landmark's Nuart Theater in West Los Angeles. Filmmaker Mark Becker will conduct Q&As Friday and Saturday at 7:30 and 9:45 p.m.

**In a nutshell:** Immigrant's story in reverse. In Spanish with English subtitles.

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